

## Advocating for biographical research in political social work in neoliberal times

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## **Advocating for Biographical Research in Political Social Work in Neoliberal Times**

### **Introduction**

This article addresses the underdeveloped field of social work political biographies and explains how this can be addressed through a novel methodological approach. Social work is viewed as a human rights and social justice profession despite the challenges to this from the neoliberal hegemony in social work (Carey, 2014). Historically, social work has an impressive alumni of political actors, perhaps the most well-known are Alice Solomon, Jane Addams, Clement Attlee and Barak Obama. Recent Cabinet members with a social work background include Tessa Jowell and Hilary Armstrong. Currently there are MPs who have taken a deep interest in social work during their parliamentary careers, these include Mike Wood, Hywel Williams and Anne Coffey. However, there is a dearth of published accounts of social workers' political biographies. Indeed, Reissman and Quinney's (2005) review of narrative accounts in social work found very few studies published in mainstream journals. The few studies that do exist tend to be introductory biographical texts for social work students and those interested in a social work career (LeCroy, 2002; Cree, 2003; Humphrey, 2011). There is a paucity of in-depth qualitative studies that inquire into the whole life course to date. This is an important omission since it leaves a gap in making sense of social workers' career choices and the meanings they ascribe to those choices within the context of neoliberal hegemony. Moreover, it leaves a gap in understanding how their life experiences to date influence the way they view

developments in the social work profession, such as the privatisation of services. This can be viewed as the neoliberal dilemma in social work since most social workers want to be human rights and social justice practitioners despite the hostility to this from neoliberalism.

The article advocates for a proven innovative methodological approach to examining social work political biographies. The approach has its roots in the radical turn in social sciences research in the 1960s and should appeal to radical social work researchers. This is so because of the more democratic nature of the methodology since it allows knowledge to emerge from data and avoid imposing pre-existing grand theories on data. While recognising that there are other approaches it explains how to combine constructivist grounded theory and biographical inquiry methodology. This approach was used for a successful doctoral research project examining social workers' political biographies in a neoliberal era. Moreover, the article will reflect on the operationalising of the methodology, the research process and will report some new findings not reported previously to illustrate the efficacy of the methodology.

### **Combined constructivist grounded theory and biographical inquiry**

This section advocates for the use of both grounded theory and biographical inquiry as a methodology to examine social work political biographies across the life course to date. It explores how using this methodology provides rich data in answering such questions

as how can we better understand the transition to political careers by social workers using this approach? How can we make sense of value commitments across the life-course? How can we capture the emergence of value commitments and moral and political motivations? What more does this approach offer in uncovering the antecedents of political behaviour orientations? A number of seminal works have influenced and inspired this article. Molly Andrews conducted biographical interviews with life-long socialists which were published in book form in 1991. She discovered the importance of influential others in forming political identities, such as teachers. Kathy Charmaz has been a very important influence on the analytical process regarding the interviews with participants in my research on social workers' political biography. Her book (2006) provides a methodical and accessible process for constructivist grounded theory analysis and coding. As far as I am aware my research study is the only one of its kind to combine both grounded theory and biographical inquiry methodology to examine the political biographies of social workers.

Grounded theory is informed by the anti-positivist epistemological perspective and ways of knowing. Since the late 1980s grounded theory has become the most widely used methodological approach in qualitative social sciences (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). It originated from the works of both Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss in the 1960s and early 1970s (Glaser and Strauss, 1965, 1967, 1968 and 1971). Glaser and Strauss came together at the University of California during the intellectually fertile years of the 1960s

and early 1970s. The publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967 has been called ‘revolutionary’ and a watershed moment in the history of qualitative research (Walker and Myrick, 2006:547). In it Glaser and Strauss boldly proclaimed (1967:2):

‘The basic theme in our book is the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research’.

Grounded theory is an inductivist approach that draws out ‘theory from data’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:1). An inductivist approach entails extrapolating patterns from data to form conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2006 and 2014). This means that grounded theories are discovered through the process of acquiring and analysing data and then confirming it through gathering further data until a point of theoretical saturation is attained. The process of gathering further data is called the constant comparison method where data is scrutinised for theoretical patterns and categories (Covan, 2007). Consistent with an inductivist approach in grounded theory, data is allowed to generate theory rather than starting with a predetermined hypothesis to be tested (Humphries, 2008). This is accomplished through interpretation and conceptualising about the data using the grounded theory coding analytical process.

Grounded theory lends itself well to research on social work political biographies because it has a long affinity with health and social care research, with an impressive track record supported by ‘...highly developed methodological guidelines’ (Oliver, 2012:373). For

example, Strauss' close associate, Juliet Corbin, was a nurse by profession and many other nurses were inspired to pursue qualitative research through grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006 and 2014). Moreover, the methodology is particularly suited for political social workers since prominence is given to reflexivity and empathy, both familiar social work territories. Although grounded theory offers a scientific and rigorous methodology, the approach has been interrogated from numerous perspectives. The limitations of grounded theory need to be recognised, such as in the area of generalizability where concepts and theories derived from data may be contested by the view that substantive grounded theories are not generalizable to the whole population. The grounded theory response to this criticism is that the rigorous methods used are not intended to produce results that can be generalised to whole populations but rather are representative in theoretical terms.

Biographical inquiry is defined as resting on 'the collection, analysis, and performance of stories, accounts, and narratives that speak to turning-point moments in people's lives' (Denzin, 2001:59). It views individuals as having agency and are actively involved in the making of society and not merely made by it (Roberts, 2002). Biography has emerged as a form of life writing which gives a voice to people not heard in traditional writing, such

as feminists and minority perspectives of the ‘disenfranchised, the powerless, or those with alternative visions’ (Smith, 1998:215). The negation of ordinary voices has been echoed in the research process where ordinary biographical narratives were ignored as unscientific (Smith, 1998).

The radical change of direction in the social sciences in the 1960s led to a more favourable climate for qualitative methodologies, such as biographical inquiry in social research; and new voices to be heard, such as those of gender, class, ethnicity and the professions (Rustin, 2000; Chamberlayne et al, 2000). Today biographical research is viewed as a valid means of understanding major social change through interpreting the lives of individuals within families, groups and institutions. Biographical inquiry shares many of the roots of grounded theory, namely a social constructionist perspective, symbolic interactionism, and the democratic turn in social sciences in the 1960s.

Biography also draws together personal accounts and historical and social contexts, reflecting C. Wright Mill’s notion of ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’ (Wright Mills, 1955:248); and Denzin’s concept of the ‘universal singulars’, universalizing in their singular moments features of the historical moment (Denzin, 2001:59). Biography helps to construct identities rather than living out a predetermined life path (Bathmaker, 2010). Essentially participants in biographical research have an opportunity to negotiate their identities and to make sense of their lives as active agents

Biographical interviewing involves extracting extended and broad accounts of life histories from the lived experiences of participants during the course of one or more interviews (Reissman and Quinney, 2005). The focus on life histories is useful and highly pertinent since key events in forming identities tend to be life-long processes (Winnicott, 1986). For example, a social worker raised in a family that valued social justice needs to negotiate the neoliberal challenge in their social work careers. Biographical interviewing has synergy with social work practice since social workers are dealing with service users' biographies on a day-to-day basis (Kyllonen, 2004). Social workers also deploy interview skills when carrying out assessments, including the skills of empathy, exploration, listening, open-ended questioning, and purposeful intuition (Rogers, 1967; Egan, 1994).

#### Reflecting on the Operationalisation of the Methodology

Fourteen biographical interviews were completed, two of which were pilot studies. They were conducted in either the participants' own homes or in a suitable office environment. It was important to conduct the interviews at a place where the participants felt comfortable because of the potential sensitive nature of the information shared (Schutze, 2007a). The pilot studies were important since it was discovered that biographical interviews proceed best not with an initial question but rather a brief summary of the interviewer's own political biography without using jargon nor the term political identity



since this would potentially invite the participants to provide definitions rather than a free-flowing account of their lives. The participants were all qualified social workers who no longer worked in the profession but were actively engaged in politics either as parliamentary representatives or activists. The participants were found through an online search including parliamentary profiles and Who's Who. Once the interviewing process started participants themselves recommend other social workers who fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Their age ranged from mid-thirties to late sixties, six were men and eight were women, two of the women were from a minority ethnic group. The majority of the participants were from a middle-class background, reflecting the notion that social work is a middle-class profession. At this early stage I was surprised by how many participants were willing to participate in the research, including politicians who lived far away from my locality and with whom I had no relationship, such as being their constituent. Their willingness reflects their continued commitment to the social work profession and their concerns for the future of the profession in neoliberal times.

Ethics approval for the research was given by the Keele University Ethical Review Panel in March 2013. All participants gave written consent for the interviews to be recorded. A topic guide was used during the interviews and all participants were encouraged to speak freely and at length with as few interruptions as possible. The topic guide had a list of four areas to be covered in the interviews, these were the nurturing years and adolescence; entry into the social work profession; their social work career; and their political career.

Although the interviews were free-flowing the topic guide was useful in maintaining relevance. Thus, the participants were able to convey the stories of their lives until a point of narrative coda had been reached. This was a point where the participants felt that they had conveyed all that they could convey about their lives. In colloquial terms this could be described as getting things off their chest. The interviews lasted for at least an hour-and-a-half and with some participants, helpful intervention was required during the course of the interviews and with others the interviews ran their course with fewer interruptions. Consistent with the grounded theory concept of constant comparison the topic guide was adapted in the light of post-interview analysis and recognition of the need to focus-in more closely on some areas in subsequent interviews.

One early concern was whether the participants, being politicians and used to being interviewed, would have 'prepared' answers since they may have given their political biographies numerous times before. It would have been a problem had they not engaged in the interviews in a spontaneous and free flowing manner. This fear proved to be groundless since all the politicians talked openly and at great length. Once engaged in the biographical interview the politicians gave spontaneous and free-flowing answers that included great detail about their life course to date.

It soon became apparent during the interview process that the early years of childhood and adolescence were very important in forming participants' political identities. This justified the methodology of examining the participants' whole life course through

grounded theory and a biographical approach. Other methodologies might not have devoted as much time to examining the participants' yearly years in such detail. The early years were especially important in families where there was a strong culture of political involvement by parents, such as through being an elected representative. In these families there were many discussions and the participants were exposed to radical literature which they remember reading and being influenced by, such as the book 'Black Like Me' (Griffin 1962). The children from these families demonstrated the strongest political identities as exemplified by their life-long commitment to political action and social justice:

*I probably would say I come from a long line of socialist, claiming Left leaning, people. My maternal Grandfather was a card-carrying Communist, a lifelong member of the Communist Party, visited Russia in the thirties and forties and very, you know, convinced by Lenin and Stalin until he became less convinced as all the facts came out... he remained a member of the ... Communist Party all of his life. And from his influence, I suppose to my mother, and from my mother to me. My mother never joined the Communist Party but certainly was also of that, what would be I supposed deemed now as Far Left, in her leanings.*

A surprising finding from examining the early years using the chosen methodology was the role of teachers in the development of participants' political identities, reflecting Andrews' (1991) earlier finding of the significant other. Four participants had parents

who were teachers and another two mentioned how they had been influenced as children by their teachers, such as to be sceptical about politics and to take an interest in current affairs. Since the findings cannot be generalised one has to be guarded about the significance of this finding although it might indicate a close relationship between parents who are teachers and political social workers. In the case of one participant, the significant other was the father of a friend who was a local Labour councillor. The participant remembers how at a young age he was impressed by the councillor's ability to help ordinary people who contacted him. Other significant childhood factors in the forming of political identities included awareness of social and political upheavals, such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. For example, one participant had been traumatised as a child by the fear of nuclear war. The participants who experienced poverty as children were not aware at the time that their experience was different to other families. The experience of poverty contributed to the formation of their political identities over time, since a full understanding of the significance of poverty in their lives occurred in stages.

After each interview was conducted the recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber to make time for analysis. Coding is the 'fundamental' system of analysis in grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990:12). It encompasses many of the great canons of grounded theory methodology, including constant comparison, theoretical sampling

and conceptualisation. Coding, according to Charmaz (2008:217) provides the ‘analytical scaffolding on which to build’ and drives the next stage of the research including subsequent interviewing. Charmaz (2006 and 2014) added to the variation of coding methods within grounded theory with her constructivist grounded theory coding system. This was the system of coding adopted by the author in the research with political social workers. The constructivist process has a two-step first stage coding analysis process, namely line-by-line coding and incident-to-incident coding. The purpose of coding for Charmaz is to form descriptive categories for chunks of knowledge and to start conceptualising abductively about what the data may be saying. In carrying-out line-by-line coding hundreds of descriptive codes were produced, almost a code for every line. The advantage of such scrutiny was that nothing of importance was missed in the data.

The second stage of coding for Charmaz is known as focussed coding where the first stage analysis is condensed to broader concepts thus aiding the process of theory emerging from data. This stage produced far fewer codes, about one code per paragraph which summarised the main concepts derived from the initial codes. The third stage is theoretical coding which assists theorising about the data. The theoretical codes are more general than focussed codes and help to ‘tell an analytic story that has coherence’ by identifying thematic links between focussed codes (Charmaz, 2006:63). There were far fewer theoretical codes and they covered areas such as the importance of the yearly years, families, the social work career, and the challenges of neoliberal changes in social work,

in forming and developing participants' political identities. The final grounded theory arrived at was about the construction of the social worker politician within the context of political social work. Within this approach it is more accurate to describe theories as being constructed rather than discovered (Flick, 2009). Coding provides a rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis, an area that has traditionally been viewed as a weakness of qualitative researchers who have tended to identify themes without demonstrable scientific analytical tools and methods. The negative side of the constructivist grounded theory coding process is the amount of time it consumes, and the patience required. The analysis produced a huge amount of codes at the initial stage which were later narrowed down to theoretical codes. It was rewarding gaining confidence in a rigorous analytical process and fascination on seeing theoretical categories emerge from data. The research also confirmed Humphrey's (2011) typology of the citizen route into social work. However, it extended the course of this typology for the first time beyond entry into the social work profession to encompass career progression and later political career. In other words, it explains what happens to social workers who enter the profession through the citizen route once they are in the profession.

During the coding process two theoretical codes emerged regarding the participants social work career, these were initial enthusiasm for social work and later the sense of career disillusionment. The disillusionment was closely linked to a neoliberal environment including hyper-professionalism and managerialism. Social work was a natural career

choice for them because of their social justice values and developing political identities.

They demonstrated passion and enthusiasm for social work early on in their careers:

*But I was also very, very interested in sociology and, yes, when I finished my programme my first job was a job in a community organisation and this fits very well to my ... I would say to my sociological orientation and to my political orientation. And I worked then for seven years in the field of community work and community development... And during the time when I did community work I had a lot of, I would say, a lot of political projects.*

Using a biographical approach meant focussing a significant amount of the interview on participants' social work careers. This uncovered some interesting findings, such as social work careers helped to evolve participants' political identities through the experience of encountering poverty amongst their clients. This encounter shocked them and reaffirmed their commitment to social justice. Other significant encounters were the harsh treatment of unaccompanied children by the criminal justice system, such as their inappropriate detention in criminal justice settings. The participants engaged in political action during their social work careers, such as through trades union activity and as members of political parties, the latter activity conducted in their own time outside of work. They also campaigned within single issue groups to advance social justice, such as anti-racism and minority language rights.

It was during the coding analytical process that the strongest testimonies emerged about the negative impact of neoliberalism on the social work profession and on the participants. This was at the stage in their career just before they left the profession and became full-time politicians. Participants talked about significant developments such as a depleted social work, a bullying culture and a depoliticized social work. A discernible change had happened in the profession particularly in the area of management style and competence according to the participants. One found a lack of support and understanding about her political role as a county councillor. While in the past the local authority had allowed her time off to attend council meetings in the latter years such support was not forthcoming and there was a general lack of cooperation regarding time to attend meetings despite the participant's view that it could be of benefit to her authority to have one of their social workers as a member of the council in an elected capacity. There was also disillusionment about the demise of community work and the dominance of case work. The majority of participants felt that social work had become more technocratic with strict eligibility criteria and systems of accounting and auditing. One of the reasons for leaving the social work professions for full-time politics was to resolve the dilemma between their political identities and values and the changed character of the social work profession in neoliberal times:

*Well I think it has got worse really because I think one of the things about social work that was always apparent to me right from the beginning was that there seemed to be much more*



*equality you know, always on first name terms, you didn't have such a hierarchy. Certainly, for me even now, because I have worked very closely with medical staff as well because I was working in the disability field, social work seemed much more egalitarian...*

*So I think it has probably got worse thinking about it, social work, from my experience in terms of maybe poor management or managers coming in who don't understand the job. I think what has happened in social work is that you know you have got a lot of bureaucracy being brought in, for the right reasons, but it is creating a lot more time-consuming work to do and there isn't the recognition that you actually need more people or more time to do it.*

*And then you have got the financial pressures, so I think inevitably you can end up with a bullying sort of culture really, in work places and I think quite a lot of social workers have been subject to that because...*

*Well I only came across it, I would say, just in the last couple of years I was in work and it was one of the motivations for me to actually retire. But I know of other people who have come across it and I think I was quite sheltered really most of the time I was in social work, I mean, I never... only in the last couple of years did I start to feel that there was anybody kind of looking over my shoulder and sort of was going to kind of, you know, pick on people and this kind of thing. Or have unrealistic demands on you. Or one of the worst, not understand the work you were doing, because that is quite common if you are in a specialist area like children and disabilities, you know, you get a manager comes in who doesn't understand the work as well.*

In analysing the final part of the interviews on participants' political careers two theoretical codes emerged, namely vocational politician and extending social work to reflect the significant finding of how strongly the participants continued to identify with the social work profession. As politicians the participants took an active role in campaigning against neoliberal policies, particularly the austerity measures that followed the 2008 credit-crunch crisis and subsequent recession. They sought to persuade the local authorities where they were members not to make financial cuts to social work budgets that would leave a negative effect on children and families. In this respect the participants demonstrated a resistance to neoliberalism which is in contrast to the view that social work as a profession has acquiesced to neoliberalism (Butler and Drakeford, 2001). They viewed the social work profession as under attack because of its closeness to the precariat class and those who are experiencing the full brunt of the austerity cuts in local authority budgets. Their political identities intensified during this period as they challenged the barriers to services and the lack of social rights in an age where ironically the clients of social work are viewed as consumers in policy document rhetoric. Moreover, they used task and finishing groups in local authorities to develop evidence based approaches to social work services, such as in the area of disabled children. A significant finding was that the participants maintained a strong social work identity well into their political careers and continued to develop their social work interests and expertise in, for example, parliamentary roles:

*I think social work values have a really important place to play in our society and as soon as we start moving away from them and the more we move away from those things which are around, compassion, believing people can change, then I think the more we move towards a society that isn't such a great place to live in really.*

The fact that the participants took a positive step by becoming elected politicians contrasts with the dominant narrative about the hegemony of neoliberalism in social work, namely a narrative of despair. Furthermore, the participants demonstrated an eagerness to increase their advocacy on behalf of the social work profession by working in partnership, such as through the work of the All-Party Parliamentary Social Work Group. Thus, they were in a good place to campaign for the interests of the social work profession and influence the direction of the profession at a high level of policy making. The participants were bearing the brunt of the storm as far as the decline in capitalism is concerned and its periodic crises, in the participants' case many were responding to the austerity measures following the 2008 crisis which ironically emboldened neoliberalism as a hegemonic force (Mirowski 2014):

*I got the rules on mental health claimants in the DSS changed nationally as a result of a man in my constituency starving to death with 9p in his pocket, in his sleeping bag, and it was because his benefit had been stopped because he didn't respond to a letter from the DSS that said if you don't respond within 24 days your benefit will be stopped, he was going through a phase of believing that letters that came through his door were letters from the devil threatening to kill him. So of course he didn't respond to it, he didn't touch*

*it, so the rules were changed so that a computer couldn't issue such letters, a manager had to be involved personally. So it has been things like that which have thrown up cases of point where I have felt that it was right to pursue it.*

To conclude this section, the use of a biographical approach allowed participants to talk freely and at length about their political careers enabling one participant to identify many of the problems in social work in neoliberal times and how discouraged he was in the present but hopeful that new ways of working politically by enhancing democracy could bring about positive change for the future of social work and an antidote to neoliberalism:

*And I am incredibly sceptical about the ability of local authorities to manage social work services, and dismayed at the way that, so often, the quality of social work seems to depend on the commitment of particular individuals who get into a position where they are able to make things happen at a local level but then they move on and everything behind them collapses and falls away. We talked about Rochdale earlier, I think you can see this sort of thing happening in Hackney, you can see it in lots of local authorities. It seems so difficult to sustain really good practice and as I said, I am very, very sceptical about... you know, I have seen the local authorities and the large charities as well, working out how they can carry out things to a minimum, carry out the bare statutory duties, rather than the spirit of pieces of legislation.*

*And I think in order to really do that well, you first of all have to have an organisation which is prepared to commit itself to really excellent services. But you have got to have a much better informed and engaged electorate and you have got to have workforce which is much better informed and much more engaged and, you know, what I see from local authorities is people who are quite prepared to put up with the fact that 20 or 30 percent of people vote in local elections and trade unions, which are prepared to serve their own ends rather than rock the boat in the interests of services.*

*And I think the whole system needs a whole dose of democracy radicalisation, better information, better engagement from people and we will never have the sort of society that I would want to see without people being 'getting up off our collective back sides' basically and running services ourselves in ways that just isn't happening at the moment, yes.*

## **Conclusion**

This article has addressed the paucity of published political biographies in social work and has advocated the case for the innovative use of combining constructivist grounded theory and biographical inquiry as one successful approach to address the gaps in social work political biographies. The article has reflected and analysed the efficacy of the methodology with reference to the author's own research with social workers with a political identity. Combining both methodologies results in data that is sensitive to the participants' lives as well as the influence of the wider societal context, including the hegemony of neoliberalism in the social work profession and the dilemma that this has caused for social workers as human rights and social justice professionals. It provides a systematic strategy for rigorous analysis of how social workers have experienced the hegemony of neoliberalism in the profession. The article has argued that the use of both complimentary methodologies can produce rich data and new knowledge about social workers' life histories and their intersection with social work and political careers. It mentioned that many of the interviewing skills necessary for biographical interviewing are already familiar to social workers from their practice experience, such as listening skills, asking open ended questions and empathy. Findings were presented from a

research project on the declared and enacted political identities of social workers, such as the importance of the early years in forming political identities and the significance of the social work career in evolving such identities. The findings were presented to illustrate how the methodology produced rich and significant data about social workers' political biographies. Furthermore, it has been argued in this article that a political biographical perspective can elucidate how social workers respond to significant changes within the social work profession, such as the hegemony of neoliberalism and privatisation measures. Such responses are best understood in the context of social workers' values and beliefs formed from the early years to date. The strengths and limitations of the methodology have been acknowledged, such as its synergy with social work skills and the limitations of generalisability. It is hoped that the article will help to generate further interest in the neglected field of political social work biographies and encourage other researchers to engage with this field and deploy the novel methodological approach outlined.

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